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SUBJECT: TURKEY'S BID TO WIN CENTRAL ASIAN HEARTS AND MINDS  
- UZBEKISTAN

REF: ANKARA 89

Classified By: Ambassador Richard B. Norland; reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. Paving the way for the Turkish outreach effort to Central Asia outlined reftel, Turkish MFA Deputy Under Secretary Unal Cevikoz held eight hours of political consultations in Tashkent on February 12. He told diplomats the visit was successful in improving the political dialogue between Turkey and Uzbekistan and he hopes it will lead to a visit by President Gul to Uzbekistan later this year. End Summary.

12. (C) Turkish Ambassador Kemal Asya hosted a dinner Feb. 12 to allow diplomats from NATO countries to debrief Under Secretary Cevikoz, who is completing visits to Azerbaijan,

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Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as part of the renewed Turkish focus on Central Asia described in reftel. Cevikoz noted that the last visit by a Turkish President to Uzbekistan was in 2000, by a Turkish Prime Minister in 2003, and the last political consultations were held in 2002. Turkish diplomats here confirm that relations have been poor, possibly because Turkey has hosted Uzbek opposition figure Mohammad Solikh. Turkish diplomats don't get their calls returned, and Turkish businesses (like most foreign enterprises) face regular difficulties in Uzbekistan's non-transparent investment climate. Hekmat Cetin, a former Turkish speaker of parliament, visited late last year to try to secure the release from jail of a Turkish businessman held on apparently trumped up charges, but failed to do so and likewise failed in his attempt to get a meeting with President Karimov.

13. (C) Cevikoz met with Deputy Foreign Minister Nematov, with a deputy minister in the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations, and with Senate foreign affairs committee chairman Safaev. He described the tone as one of "general receptiveness." On bilateral relations, political dialogue had resumed, the idea of forming a joint economic commission was favorably received, and their foreign ministries' consular departments would meet soon. On regional issues, there was a serious exchange on Afghanistan. The Turks described the work of their PRT in Wardak. The Uzbeks tended to focus on raising barriers to prevent spill-over from Afghanistan rather than looking at how to engage more deeply there in support of the Afghan government. In response to Uzbek concerns about the flow of opium from Afghanistan, the Turks broached the idea of working together on persuading Afghan farmers to grow licit crops. On Kosovo, the Uzbeks gave no definite answer, reflecting their continued close ties with Russia. The Uzbeks pressed the Turks to distance

themselves from EU sanctions on Uzbekistan, but Cevikoz said he made clear that Turkey's priority in joining the EU meant that it would stick with the EU position on sanctions, however that position might evolve.

¶4. (C) Cevikoz probed his diplomatic colleagues on general opinions here regarding President Karimov. He heard frustrations about the glacial pace of economic and political reform but a general interest in pursuing deeper engagement rather than isolation as a way of making Uzbekistan a net contributor to regional stability and development. As the Latvian Ambassador put it, realism requires dealing with Central Asian leaders who must be seen to be strong in order to survive; changing this political dynamic will take time. Cevikoz told the group that he hopes President Gul will make a stand-alone trip to Uzbekistan sometime this year.

¶5. (C) Comment: Despite linguistic commonalities, Turkey has been afforded no special niche in Uzbekistan, and the relationship will have to claw its way forward step-by-step on the merits as perceived by each side. Nevertheless, the positive tone of this visit by a senior Turkish diplomat augurs well for an eventual improvement in relations. This is partly due to Uzbekistan's conscious desire to slightly reduce its dependence on Russia by broadening contact with Europe and the West. A more-effective Turkish presence will contribute to growing international efforts to draw Uzbekistan out of its self-imposed regional isolation in the very heart of Central Asia.

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